The Irishman's Two Stoves: Reclaiming Freedom in a Technological Age

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The False Promises of Technological Freedom

More and more, church leaders are waking up to the fact that the most urgent challenges of church leadership are those posed by technology. Many churches have rushed to embrace new technologies in their worship and communication without pausing to consider the implications, replacing prayer books with QR codes, and offering trays with apps. At the same time, pastors have watched their authority slowly siphoned off to the multitude of podcast gurus or Instagram influencers—or else have sought to join the attention rat race by taking to Twitter to opine on the issues of the day. Worst of all, clergy have witnessed a proliferation of technology-driven pastoral problems in their congregations, from marriage-destroying pornography addictions to gender dysphoria.

To think clearly about technology, we must think about the false promise of freedom that it offers, and how it contrasts with the freedom that God created us for in the beginning. This was not a freedom to do just anything, but a freedom to rule as kings, to take dominion over creation as image-bearers of the Great King. This was a freedom bound by the limits of creaturehood, but a freedom enjoyed at the very highest reaches of creaturehood, and intended for even greater exaltation and glory, if Adam and Eve had passed the test. But they just didn't have the patience.

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"Take and eat, and you will be like God," the serpent promised. Kingship and queenship were not enough; Adam and Eve longed for the freedom of infinitude. And strangely enough, they believed that creation itself—a fruit grown from the dust of the earth—could give them the power that belonged only to the creator.

This is the temptation that technology poses in every age: the lure of transcending our limits, becoming gods, and doing so *without the trouble of waiting*. Technology promises us reward without labor—or at any rate more reward with less labor. With technology, we take the stuff of creation, which we have been called to guard and keep, and use it to rival and defy our Creator. Just in case we didn't get the message from Genesis 3, God repeats it in a second Fall narrative in Genesis 11. Now, it is not a fruit grown from the dust of the ground that will enable man to reach the heavens, but bricks baked from the dust of the ground. With their extraordinary technological abilities, men are now able to build "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" and thus to "make a name for themselves" (Gen. 11:4), rather than waiting in patient devotion upon the name which is above every name. Recognizing the power of human ingenuity, God discerns the peril that awaits our effort to transcend the limits of our creatureliness: "this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Gen. 11:6). Sure enough, it was only the beginning of what we would do. Today we have pierced the heavens and walked on the Moon, we have split the atom and called down fire from heaven upon our enemies.

But of course, technology is not all bad; far from it. We were made, after all, to take dominion over the creatures, to transform the voiceless creation that it might give voice to the glory of God, through art and music and metalworking. Genesis testifies to the deep ambiguity of all our technological making by attributing the earliest technologies—music-making and metallurgy—to the descendants of Cain (Gen. 4:21). But if we were tempted to view such works as evil in themselves, Scripture quickly rebukes us in Exodus, where these Cainite technologies become the instruments of the Spirit for the glory of God: "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft" (Ex. 31:2-5). When David reforms the tabernacle worship and Solomon builds the temple, the technologies of music-making are likewise offered in service to the Creator. And when in Revelation 21, the kinds of the earth bring their glory into the New Jerusalem, we can be confident that this glory includes the astonishing fruits of human technology over the millenia.

Once we worked primarily on the raw material of the lower creation, on rocks and dirt, plants and occasionally animals; now we work upon human nature itself, both our bodies (in the form of biotechnology) and our minds (in the form of digital technology).

Technology is not merely a means by which we bring the original hidden glories of creation to full expression. It is also a means by which we resist, and in some measure roll back, the curse of Genesis 3. If we turn to technology to reduce human labor, who can blame us, in a world where creation itself now fights against us and increases all our labors? "Cursed is the ground because of you…by the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen. 3:17, 19); but rather less sweat, thankfully, in the age of the tractor and the combine. "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16)—but rather less pain, we may be grateful, in the age of modern medicine. Indeed, even the most determined Luddite amongst us, I feel sure, does not want to go back to a world before antiseptics and anesthetics, a world in which a large share of pregnancies ended in agonizing deaths for both mother and child.

What is technology, then? A God-given tool for mitigating the pain of the Curse? A manifestation of our original calling to take dominion over the world? Or a means by which we try to turn creation itself against the Creator, straining against the limits of our finitude so that we might be as gods? Clearly, it can be all three; it can be a means of resisting the bondage of

sin and death, of expressing our original creative freedom, or of ultimately destroying our freedom in a search for a freedom that is not ours to enjoy. To use technology for true freedom requires a wisdom and discernment beyond our years, especially as new technologies emerge faster than we can wrap our heads around them. But we have no choice except to do our best to grow up into such wisdom.

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lthough technology has always been with us, it is hard to resist the sense that something has changed profoundly in the last century or two. Once we were the masters, and technology our servant; today we feel increasingly at the mercy of our own creations. Once we developed particular technologies, instruments to perform given tasks; now we seem to simply inhabit a world of technology—an all-encompassing reality from which seems difficult to escape, difficult to lay hold of any piece of created order that we have not already re-ordered in our image. Even if we have the good fortune to behold an unspoiled mountain vista or sublime waterfall, we are likely to admire it only through the lens of our smartphone, reducing the world to digital form so we can use it to build up our online followings. With the emergence of new digital and biotechnologies, we are at greater and greater risk of trying to make ourselves as gods, and in the process, rendering ourselves slaves.

What has shifted? Well, according to C.S. Lewis, diagnosing the change underway eight decades ago in his *Abolition of Man*, the object of our technologies has shifted. Once we worked primarily on the raw material of the lower creation, on rocks and dirt, plants and occasionally animals; now we work upon human nature itself, both our bodies (in the form of biotechnology) and our minds (in the form of digital technology). Initially, we turned our technologies upon ourselves with an eye to healing the hurts of the Curse—diseases, tumors, and broken bones—thus seeking to restore our nature to its proper natural operation. Increasingly, though, we are using the same technologies to try and free ourselves from the very limits of creaturehood, to achieve an abolition of the slavery of simply being human. This, as Lewis observed, was a fool's errand, for our progressive quest to free ourselves from the constraints of nature must backfire once it passes this point: "It is like the famous Irishman who found that a certain kind of stove reduced his fuel bill by half and thence concluded that two stoves of the same kind would enable him to warm his house with no fuel at all."[1] Once we turn our technologies upon ourselves with the idea of remaking the human condition, we are both subject and object of this power, master and slave: "Each new power won by man is a power over man as well. Each advance leaves him weaker as well as stronger. In every victory, besides being the general who triumphs, he is also the prisoner who follows the triumphal car."[2]

"Nothing" is Very Strong

owhere are the godlike pretensions of modern technology more apparent than in the digital realm; nowhere else do the warnings of Genesis 3 echo so loudly. With the digital world, it seems, we have finally found a way to escape the basic limitations of creatureliness, the constraints of time and space, the stubborn resistance of materiality. We can, like the characters in the profound technology parable *Inception*, "make our own world," generating images and experiences that would be impossible in the real world, living out fantasy lives that provide escape from the dreariness of the ones God has called us to. We can also aspire to

[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 45.
[2] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 37.

godlike knowledge, with nearly instantaneous access to nearly everything that has ever been known. We can do all this with the absolute minimum of effort. Eve at least had to reach up and pick a fruit to "be like God"—all we have to do is swipe a forefinger.

And nowhere else do we see so clearly the self-defeating, self-enslaving character of the modern quest for technological liberation. In one of the most memorable of *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis describes the condition of man in the grip of *acedia*, the world-weariness that drags us away from God and into the Nothing:

> You can make him waste his time not only in conversation he enjoys with people whom he likes, but in conversations with those he cares nothing about on subjects that bore him. You can make him do nothing at all for long periods. You can keep him up late at night, not roistering, but staring at a dead fire in a cold room. All the healthy and out-going activities which we want him to avoid can be inhibited and *nothing* given in return, so that at least he may say, as one of my own patients said on his arrival down here, 'I now see that I spent most of my life in doing *neither* what I ought *nor* what I liked.' … Nothing is very strong: strong enough to steal away a man's best years not in sweet sins but in a dreary flickering of the mind over it knows not what and knows not why, in the gratification of curiosities so feeble that the man is only half aware of them, in drumming of fingers and kicking of heels, in whistling tunes that he does not like, or in the long, dim labyrinth of reveries that have not even lust or ambition to give them a relish, but which once chance association has started them, the creature is too weak and fuddled to shake off.[3]

Such a state of self-alienation is nothing new to the digital age—Lewis says that "a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do."[4] But it has never been easier than in the age of the smartphone, when anything or nothing is sufficient to attract our wondering attention to the glowing, vibrating screen in our pocket. A family of five sit silently on a train, oblivious to the breathtaking scenery outside—not because they are absorbed in conversation with one another, but because each alone is absorbed in his or her phone. A teenager stays up late at night, not celebrating with friends but staring at images on a screen in a cold dark room. You tire momentarily of the conversation at a party, and rather than expending an ounce of effort to enliven it with a witty observation, you pull out your phone and scroll idly through the latest posts by people you care nothing about on subjects that bore you. The holidays pass and you realize you have wasted them not in rest or recreation but in the gratification of digital curiosities so feeble that you are only half aware of them but which you are too weak and fuddled to shake off.

Freedom is actually constituted by limits, limits that technology relentlessly devours.

The darkest, cruelest, and most enslaving form of this phenomenon is of course pornography, which sucks its users into dim labyrinths that have not even lust to give them a relish—only the lure of novelty, the promise of escape. But the soul-destroying power of internet pornography is really just a particularly vicious form of the soul-destroying power of the internet generally, with its endless parade of images and information stoking an unquenchable thirst for novelty, a restless, aimless foraging that seems to leave us hungrier and emptier the more media we consume.[5] Just as pornography renders its users less able to experience or enjoy real sexual partnership, so do all our bad habits of digital addiction distract us

[3] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 59–60.

[4] Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, 59.

[5] For some particularly insightful remarks on this theme, see Samuel D. James, *Digital Liturgies: Rediscovering Christian Wisdom in an Online Age* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2023), chapter 7.

from all "healthy and outgoing activities" and give nothing in return. The more time we spend looking at perfect sunsets on Instagram and trying to capture our own, the less we are able to appreciate a sunset. The more effort we expend trying to curate the perfect image of our family life for social media, the less we will be able to enjoy our children, messiness and all. The more we engage in 280-character shouting matches, the less we will be able to carry on and profit from an actual debate of perspectives. The more we resort to the gif- and emoji-laden snippets of chat threads, the less likely we will be to ever know the surpassing joys and uproarious laughter of a real conversation.

In each case, digital technology promises us the freedom of boundlessness, liberated from the constraints of time and space that govern everyday life, freed from the friction that comes with any physical interaction. And in each case, we find that we have simply forged new chains for ourselves: unable to discipline our own impulses to swipe and click, unable to maintain boundaries around our own time and sanity, unable to remember thirty minutes of web-browsing later what we were even looking for and why, we learn again the hard way that freedom is actually *constituted* by limits, limits that technology relentlessly devours.

Who's to Blame?

In *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis also warns us not to delude ourselves with the popular idea that technology is wielded equally by all. The socialist utopia of equally shared ownership of the means of production is a pipe dream. "What we call Man's power over Nature turns out to be a power exercised by some men over other men with Nature as its instrument,"[6] Lewis warns. He immediately stresses that this does not mean that men will necessarily abuse such power—they may use it with the most benevolent of intentions. But the fact remains that this is simply what technology *means* in a world of unequal distribution of resources: the acquisition of new tools by certain men, corporations, or nations, that will confer power over other men or nations. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more true than in the realm of digital technology. Although the internet emerged three decades ago with the promise of liberation and democratization, giving every human being equal access to a world of information and creative potential, today it is dominated by a handful of gigantic firms with greater global market power than any in history.[7]

> *We should not pretend either that all of us are simply passive victims of tyrannical Big Tech titans. Many of us have been willing accomplices of our own enslavement.*

Faced with this power imbalance and our deepening dissatisfaction over our digital predicament, it is tempting to turn and bite the hand that has fed us for the past couple of decades. Acclaimed books like Shoshana Zuboff's *Age of Surveillance Capitalism* have exposed the perverse incentives at the heart of much of the Big Tech business model: creating ever-more addictive products to ensure ever-more "engaged" users, so as to extract more and more behavioral data to sell to advertisers.[8] And while subsequent legislative reforms and user revolts have modified the picture somewhat, there is no sense pretending that most digital technology represents a happy, healthy "free market" in which firms are simply supplying customers with the products and services that will improve their quality of life. Still, we should not

[6] Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, 35.

[7] See Josh Hawley, *The Tyranny of Big Tech* (Washington: Regnery, 2021).

[8] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

pretend either that all of us are simply passive victims of tyrannical Big Tech titans. Many of us have been willing accomplices of our own enslavement. Consider the frequent bursts of outrage about consumer "privacy" in the face of all-pervasive digital surveillance.

There are good reasons to seek privacy, of course, but often, our search for privacy is motivated by shame. No sooner did Adam and Eve commit the first sin than they tried to enter "incognito mode," hiding their nakedness with fig leaves and cowering in the bushes to avoid divine accountability. From that day to this, human beings have longed for a way to keep their sins to themselves. But this is rendered difficult by our need for community. Given the weakness and fragility of our natures, we, unlike many animals, have to live in close contact with others of our kind, and these human communities tend to keep an eye on the behavior of our members. With the rise of the internet, it became conceivable for the first time in history to enjoy many of the benefits of life in society without the burden of such accountability. Far more than any previous generation, we have found a way to escape from the prying eyes of neighbors and authorities and pursue our private pastimes or vices without leaving any trace on the social world around us. Indeed, if we ever forget to enter "incognito mode," we can with a single click of a button do what every sinner has longed to do since Eden: *delete history*.

The reality is that most of us are quite happy to accept the ubiquitous surveillance of Big Data as a substitute for the intrusive personal accountability of yesteryear. We no longer watch over one another, those closest to us, and grateful for this liberation, we are happy to let Meta and Google watch over us instead. If we can escape being manipulated by our parents, pastors, and spouses, we reason, we are more than willing to let ourselves be manipulated by targeted advertisers and feed aggregators.

Church leaders must take the lead in helping re-establish communities of accountability within their congregations.

Escaping the Dim Labyrinth

Even as we're slowly awakening to the implications of our technological predicament, the technology continues to develop faster than we can keep up, with AI rapidly reshaping the nature of work and communication, sex and friendship. Church leaders can easily feel overwhelmed by the pace of this development and paralyzed in their attempts to respond. The purpose of this paper has been primarily to diagnose the challenge, but I will close with just three brief suggestions about how clergy can begin to counter the forms of unfreedom in which our technological age has enmeshed us.

1) ***Start talking about it***

In a famous 1968 social psychology experiment, researchers piped smoke into a waiting room as participants filled out questionnaires, to see how they would respond. When individuals were alone in the room, most lost little time in running to report the smoke. When multiple people were in the waiting room, however, only 1 in 8 did anything about it, no matter how thick the smoke got. The lesson? If no one else seems worried, neither are we. Often, this herd mentality is helpful, keeping us from overreacting to unreal threats. Sometimes, though, it means we will all suffocate together. So it is with today's proliferating technological harms—none of us say anything because no one else is saying anything, and we don't want to be the weird one. Church leaders are no exception. They are understandably afraid of seeming moralistic or legalistic, especially if they're also perceived as being out-of-touch from the problems they're seeking to address. The rapid changes in digital technology mean that most clergy will, in fact, be behind the curve relative to many of their parishioners, especially younger generations.

But these fears cannot prevent church leadership from exercising genuine leadership in addressing the most pressing problems of our generation. Such leadership doesn't mean pretending to have all the answers—instead, it will surely involve calling upon congregants our outside Christian leaders with relevant expertise and insights. But it does mean being willing to start the conversation.

2) ***Put a moratorium on new technology adoption and implement robust decision-making frameworks***

Many churches do not give a great deal of thought to the technologies they adopt in support of their teaching, worship, and community life. Indeed, senior church leadership may sometimes play little or no role in such decisions, which are left to the secretary or support staff. But these technologies have the power to profoundly reshape a congregation's experience of the Word, of worship, and of their communion with one another as the body of Christ. Some technologies unquestionably serve to strengthen churches (e.g., church email lists or online directories). Some are contested (such as the use of projector screens in worship, or pastor's blogs). Others, I would argue, are almost unquestionably bad (e.g., QR-code liturgies). None, however, should be adopted without a disciplined process of reflection and decision-making about how this new use of technology will reshape the life of the church community.

3) ***Cultivate accountability not anonymity***

As noted above, our headlong rush into the digital world reflects a decision to replace accountability with anonymity, judging that we would rather be surveilled by faceless data-miners than by our parents and pastors. Many congregants now live double lives, showing up in church each Sunday as pious, respectable, reserved believers, while using anonymous social media accounts to dabble in conspiracy theories or racist rhetoric, or participating in pornographic chat rooms. A culture of Christian faithfulness will be impossible to sustain through the twenty-first century if such trends continue. But obviously pastors cannot solve such problems alone; even if most parishioners were willing to make their digital lives fully transparent to their pastors, these would simply not have time or emotional stamina to keep tabs on them. Perhaps this challenge represents an opportunity to retool and repurpose the often-maligned small group. What if church small groups, instead of just hosting social nights and watered-down Bible studies, functioned also as accountability groups, in which each member knew all of their fellow members' social media handles, and was willing to have hard conversations with one another about their online activity? Many of us, I think, would find such accountability freeing, but none of us wants to be the busybody taking the first step. Church leaders must take the lead in helping re-establish communities of accountability within their congregations.

These are just a few suggestions, and much more needs to be said. But hopefully these reflections will offer a framework for church leaders to begin grappling with the new challenges posed by our technological age, the idolatrous conceptions of freedom they reflect, and how to begin restoring the conditions for the exercise of an authentically Christian freedom in our lives and churches.